

Through Swift Waters and Consuming Fire

Isaiah 43:1-7

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There are two images in this morning's text that send a shiver down my spine. The first is that of a swirling river. Moving water is a remarkably powerful force. In Rocky Mountain National Park there is a place we always visit called the Alluvial Fan. It is a waterfall at the bottom of a canyon. The base of the waterfall is littered with enormous boulders, many the size of an SUV. They are bigger than can be moved by any man-made machine. It would take several charges of dynamite to break them down to movable pieces.

But the boulders were not there thirty years ago. They weren't left behind millions of years ago by retreating glaciers. The boulders were put there by water. In 1982 a dam broke on Lawn Lake, upstream from where the Alluvial Fan currently is. 674 acre feet of water were released, coming down in the form of a 25-foot-high wall of water, tearing the sides out of the mountain walls as it made the six-mile journey downstream to the base of the mountain.

I am a great respecter of the power of water.

Just cross one of the bridges on the way to Myrtle Beach when the tide is coming in, and notice the swirling currents and the choppy waves as river current meets tidal flow. Even as a good swimmer, I would not want to get caught in some of those currents.

The other image in the text from Isaiah that sends shivers down my spine is the image of consuming fire. Fire is indeed a fearful thing. In the western portion of the United States forest fires are an annual occurrence, destroying thousands of acres and often consuming mountainside communities. But you don't have to look that far for evidence of the destructive power of fire; remember the fires that raged through North Myrtle Beach last spring, destroying or damaging hundreds of homes. Even closer to home than that, though, is the sad fact that in the four and a half years that I have been pastor of this church, three member homes have been destroyed by fire.

I am a great respecter of the power of fire.

Fire and water – two forces of nature that have from the beginning of time stirred up terror within the human heart.

And yet it is in the midst of a description of consuming fire and turbulent waters that God utters two simple words: fear not. Fear not, says God... When you pass through the waters I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze...¹

¹ Isaiah 43:1, 2

Fear not... Do not be afraid... Words spoken in Scripture time and again, whether they be conveyed to us through prophets or angels, or through the voice of God himself, or through his son Jesus Christ. Fear not... Do not be afraid...

And yet in our lives and in our world we are constantly confronted with reasons to be afraid:

The doctor's office has called, and he needs to see you about the results of the test you took last week...

After spending well over half of your life with your spouse, suddenly you're confronted with the reality of his death, that he's no longer there for you...

The wife just kissed her husband good-bye, knowing only that he's going to be somewhere in Afghanistan, while she's now faced with the task of caring for their three children by herself...

A young man looks around his house, wondering if there is anything else he can sell so he can round up enough money to pay the rent this month...

A parent gets a phone call saying there's been an accident, and please hurry....

The clerk at the store watches as one of her co-workers opens a pay envelope with a pink slip, and now she wonders if she's going to be next...

How can we not be afraid?

And yet despite the flood of things that threaten to overwhelm us, despite the firestorm of misfortune that is set to overtake us, nevertheless God calls out to us, "Fear not... Do not be afraid..." Despite all the reasons we would have to fear, God tells us otherwise: "Fear not... Do not be afraid."

How can that be? How can we not be afraid in the midst of everything that should fill us with fear? There are some things in the verses from Isaiah that help inform our faith and provide us with reasons not to fear, even when threatened by swift waters or consuming fire.

The first reason is found in two simple words that begin our text this morning: "But now..." But now—words that express a change, words that say that what was before is not the way it is always going to be. But now...

To understand the meaning of the "but now" in this morning's lesson, you have to go back a few verses into the 42nd chapter of Isaiah. The people of Israel are accused of being blind and deaf. They turn a blind eye to injustice, oppression, immorality and corruption. They refuse to listen to the prophets and to the ones who call for repentance and a return to the God of their covenant. And so God has judged the people, he has destroyed their holy city and its Temple, he has sent them away into exile, he has banished them from their land. In the last verse of the 42nd chapter, the prophet describes the judgment that has befallen the people: "So God poured out on them his burning anger, the violence of war. It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart."²

The people of Israel were living out their greatest fears—they had lost everything, and they even thought that God had abandoned them. They had every reason to fear. And for them, what had befallen them was deserved, for they had turned away from God and had ignored God's commands. They were in a firestorm of their own making.

Sometimes the misfortune that befalls us is a direct consequence of something we have done, but not always. And yet we have to acknowledge that ours is a fallen world, and the misfortune that comes our

² Isaiah 42:25

way, the struggles we encounter, the turmoil that surrounds us—it's all a result of our world being broken and fallen because of human sin. Scripture is clear that the world is cursed, not because God made it imperfectly, but because humanity has rebelled against God. Nothing, not even the natural world, is unaffected by the sinfulness of the human race.

But whether the misfortune that engulfs us is of our own making, or simply because we participate in a world that is broken and fallen, what our scripture promises us today is that God does not allow our trials and tribulations to have the final say, for in the face of turbulent waters and consuming fires God says, "But now..."

But now, though you are in the midst of the fire, it will not consume you. But now, though the waters threaten to overpower you, you will not be swept away.

Do not fear, because to whatever misfortune you may encounter, or to whatever evil that befalls you, God says he has something else for you. But now...

The second thing I find in this morning's text that provides me with reason to not be afraid in the face of trials and tribulations is that God backs up his words with his commitment to us. The whole passage points to a God who is with us through the swift waters and consuming fire, and to a God who is constantly acting on our behalf, and to a God who is personally committed to our welfare.

It is God who created us, God who formed us. Even as the potter gives painstaking attention to the way she molds and shapes the vessel on the potter's wheel, so does God give care to way we turn out. Since the very beginning, God has been personally involved. There is not one detail of our lives with which God does not have intimate knowledge. It is God who created us, God who formed us. It is God who has redeemed us, who has paid the price necessary for our salvation. God has reached deep into the pockets of his very being and purchased our freedom from sin and made us heirs to his blessing.

Look through this passage and note how many times God is the subject of the verbs. I counted more than 15 times that God is the subject of the verbs, and every verb has as its object our salvation and welfare. God says to us, "I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name... I will be with you... I am your Savior... I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west..." Words of redemption, words of deliverance, words of personal commitment and involvement.

Don't you see, God doesn't just give us words of assurance—he backs up his words with himself. There is no current too strong to tear us away from God's saving embrace. There is no fire fierce enough to burn away God's redemptive purpose. In the hands of God the waters of tribulation become the waters of cleansing and renewal; in the hands of God the fire of turmoil and trouble becomes the refiner's fire, purifying and forming according to the purpose of God.

The prophecy of Isaiah gives us God's promise of redemption, a promise God backs up with his personal and complete commitment to fulfilling. We can be sure of the redemption because God himself will see to it. We don't know what it'll be like on the other side of the swift waters and consuming fire—it's likely that things will be different; adversity has a way of changing us. But the promise of God isn't that things will be the same—the promise of God is that we'll make it to the other side, we'll make it through the fire. And we'll probably be different—maybe even stronger, better for it.

Five years ago a giant tsunami wiped out hundreds of villages and took the lives of more than a quarter-million people. Four years ago Hurricane Katrina unleashed its full fury on New Orleans, putting

more strain on the flood walls than they could bear, and New Orleans was submerged for months. Just last spring a garbage fire blew out of control and burned down dozens of houses in the Myrtle Beach area.

Today life has resumed on the countries and islands along the Indian Ocean. It's different than it was before, but cities are once again flourishing and people have begun new lives. Life has also resumed in New Orleans. To be sure, it's different than it was before, but New Orleans is being reborn little by little every day. In Myrtle Beach many of the homes destroyed or damaged by the fire have already been rebuilt or repaired. To be sure, it's different than it was before, but people are forging ahead.

My friends in Christ, floods will come, devastations will come. Hardship and trouble will come. But fear not, says our Lord, for when you pass through the waters I will be with you... When you walk through the fire you will not be consumed.

He is the same God who has created us, formed us, redeemed us. He is the same God who loves us and calls each of us by name. And in his baptism, he has come alongside us and forever sealed his commitment to us.

God says to each of us, "You are mine." May we never forget whose we are. Amen.